

T/SOR/36/5/3

PRICE

SCOTTISH & NORTHERN
£.30

CONDEMNED FROM THE DOCK:



JOHN MACLEAN

His famous speech
against
War and Capitalism

FOREWORD

Any introduction to John MacLean's famous speech from the dock, which he made on May 8th 1918 in the High Court in Edinburgh, must, inevitably, be inadequate. But it is fitting in the year of his 50th Commemoration that something should be said about the man himself, and the circumstances surrounding the trial.

The courage and sincerity of John MacLean is beyond question. That will be evident to all who read the speech. He was a man fully convinced that human emancipation was possible only as a result of social revolution. He died one year before Mussolini seized power in Italy, and ten years before Hitler seized power in Germany, and did not witness the crimes of fascism, yet it is clear from his speech that he knew the nature of the capitalist beast. One wonders how the judge and the members of the jury felt when they heard this obviously sincere man denounce capitalism from the dock with the same intensity as when he spoke to workers at his classes and public meetings.

John MacLean was in the dock because he opposed the war and upheld the Russian Revolution as pointing the way forward for the workers of the whole world. He was there at a time when unscrupulous warmongers were accusing Clydeside workers of getting German gold. It was at a time when all who opposed the war were regarded as either cowards or traitors. Despite this atmosphere John MacLean was now speaking with greater confidence than ever before. There was the Russian Revolution and, on top of that, the Clydeside shop stewards were, for the first time, calling for an end to the war. Here was a man who, like revolutionaries throughout the world, had his faith completely restored after the disappointment caused by the collapse of social-democracy at the outbreak of the war.

And here at this point a word or two should be said about the shop stewards and their attitude to the war. No sooner had it started than the Clydeside workers entered a struggle to defend established rights and raise their wages. The first blow was struck at Weir's Cathcart where the men resurrected the pre-war demand for an increase of twopence an hour. J.M. Messer had built up at the Weir factory the only work-shop committee on the Clyde. The men at the Weir works came out on strike and they were followed by the workers in all the engineering works on Clydeside. This struggle gave birth to the Clyde Workers' Committee of which Willie Gallacher was Chairman.

Gallacher, like most of the leading shop stewards, was opposed to the war but he had for a while come under the influence of John Muir, who had won him over to accepting that the war was a fact and that the fight should be within the limits that sprang from that approach. But John MacLean, with whom Gallacher had been associated for many years, had consistently expressed his hostility to the policy of confining the struggle to economic issues. Now at the time of the trial the situation had hardened, and the shop stewards were opposed to the continuance of the war.

Let it be said that Gallacher had the courage of a lion. He was honest, likeable, and popular. The decision of the shop stewards to oppose the war put Gallacher in his element. Scotland has never produced his equal as an industrial leader.

The event that John MacLean found so heartening and which helped to give him confidence took place in January 1918, when a meeting of shop stewards refused to augment the Government's supply of cannon fodder. The Government had introduced a Man-Power Bill with the aim of conscripting young unmarried engineers to take the places of the young men slaughtered on the western front. Sir Auckland Geddes came to Glasgow to win support to the Bill. It was on that occasion that the shop stewards at a mass meeting, in the presence of Sir Auckland, opposed the Bill and called for an end to the war.

The Russian Revolution was declared by John MacLean to be the greatest event in human history but it was not possible for the jury to see it that way. The Revolution was feared and, consequently, denounced by the capitalist press. Czarist generals were waging civil war against the Bolsheviks with the financial backing of the capitalist governments. Again, one wonders how the members of the jury felt when they heard the man in the dock praise Lenin and Trotsky, the two most hated men in the capitalist world. Winston Churchill, whose vocabulary was more than adequate for the ordinary rough and tumble of parliamentary politics, was at pains to find fresh epithets to hurl at Lenin and the other leaders of the Russian Revolution, but here was John MacLean hailing as friends the very men whom Churchill detested.

How could it be otherwise? John MacLean had been made an honorary member of the Petrograd Soviet and appointed Russian Consul for Glasgow. Money sent to him by the Russian Government through Kamenev was sequestered by the British Government. Lenin had never heard of him before the outbreak of the first world war, but when he did hear of him he was not slow in recognising him as the most outstanding anti-war fighter in Britain.

Those sitting in judgement on him were probably even more disturbed by what he said about the role of the working class. We can only guess what their feelings were when he said: "The working class, when they rise for their own are more dangerous to capitalists than even the German enemies at your gates." That sentence alone was sufficient to seal his fate. It was in line with his onslaught on capitalism, "...dripping with blood from head to foot."

He stood in the dock knowing full well that he was going to prison for the third time. He spoke as a man with a serious message to put forward and determined to do it. He stood there in the same pose as he always stood when speaking at classes or public meetings, his hands slightly in front of his body with palm facing palm, as if he were describing the dimensions of something or other. He showed vigour, but was not flamboyant. That was how he addressed his new audience in the High Court, Edinburgh. The members of that audience had never heard anything like it before.

He talked about strikes, politics, war and revolution. The members of the jury were left in no doubt regarding his opinions. He predicted another war arising from the prevailing conflict of interests between the great powers. He could not have foreseen the rise of Hitler and other events that led to new rivalries, and new alliances, yet he was correct in his rejection of the claim that the first world war was "the war to end war".

It was inevitable that he would be sent to prison. The sentence was one of five years imprisonment. The project he started, of setting up a Scottish Labour College had to be pursued in his absence. The war ended while he was in prison, and a general election was fixed to take place in December of that year. John MacLean was the official Labour candidate for Gorbals. His election campaign was conducted by Willie Gallacher as proxy candidate. Never since has there been an election campaign like it. The demand for the release of the great revolutionary leader was raised in every other part of Clydeside. He was released one week before polling day.

This re-print of the speech will serve a useful purpose if the reader realises that it is John MacLean speaking to him. It is about the class struggle — war — revolution. When the prisoner called from the dock: "Keep it going, boys, keep it going!" he was calling to us. John MacLean died within five years from his release from prison. He was twice again sent to prison within that time.

A great feeling prevailed in 1918. The revolution seemed to be just 'round the corner'. We have not yet reached that corner, but we are on the way. The proletariat will justify the hopes and vision of John MacLean. They will usher in the new society.

HARRY McSHANE

period, the doctor is busy getting the people into the hospital, then breaking up their organs and their systems.

Call that period the eye-squeezing period, because the treatment then given puts the eyes out of view. Through numerous expedients I was able to hold them off for a time, then round about me in a horrible way. I have stated in public since that I would rather be immediately put to death than condemned to a life sentence in Peter-head. Attacks were made upon the organs of the soul and mind, and upon the body. They were continually attacking the objects their nervous systems, and we had to constantly fight to keep them from going mad. Some of these men—some have died, some have committed suicide, others have been knocked off their heads, and in this way got into asylums. The very same process has gone on there. Mrs. Hobhouse has done a great deal of work in registering that, unfortunately, Mrs. Hobhouse, she does not know what the result has been obtained. I experienced part of the process, and I wish to emphasize the fact that this callous and systematic of destroying people is going on inside prison walls.

Whatever is done, I give notice. I give notice if there is no food inside your prison, particularly an indication of the treatment that was meted out to me. If food is forced upon me, and if I am forcibly fed, then my friends have got to bear in mind that if any evil happens to me, I am not responsible for the consequences, but the British George. If anything had happened to me, had to be fed, then last thing I would have been sent to John MacLean, not to those who are working in the interests of the Government. I have been able to lay down my principle and policy, not from mere internal and personal experience, but from objective experience. I studied that principle, I studied the evils that were going on, and the Government by reducing my diet to the minimum, and the present Secretary for Scotland knows that when I was in Perth I wrote to him asking more food because of my reduced weight. I was about eight stones in weight at that time, and the doctor after that had to force me to eat. The food, however, is not of me to force myself into the pot. My position is, therefore, that I take no more Government food, that I will not allow any food to be forced upon me, and if any food is forced upon me I am not responsible for it, but when the Government can launch millions of men in the field of battle, perhaps the mere disposal of one man is a mere bagatelle.

Russia's Fight for Freedom

So far as Russia and British slavery are concerned, I wish to draw attention to the fact that an article appeared in the "Scotsman" the other day about Bolshevism, and I have a feeling that that article was written especially for this trial to create a feeling among the junks. The statements in that article are absolutely false. Inside Russia since Lenin came to power, and the Bolsheviks came into power, there have been fewer deaths than for the same period under Czar for 300 years. Capitalists have been killed perhaps, officers have been killed perhaps, because they have not submitted to those who have come to the top—the majority of people—in the name of Bolshevism. They may have died.

When there was a shortage and disorganization of the food supplies before the Bolsheviks came into power, many have been individuals who, in their scramble for food for themselves, have gone to excess, but the crimes of which have been charged in Governments. No person could hold the Government responsible for the action of those individuals. The Bolshevik Government has not given orders to kill men. They have imposed men until a complete reconstruction of the Society has come about. It may be the case of the Co-operative movement in Russia has grown more rapidly than in any other country in Europe, and since the Bolsheviks have come into power, co-operation has been growing more and more rapidly.

The universities have been used during the day, and in the evenings, to train the working classes in order that they may become better fighters in their country in an intelligent manner. Many books have been used in the evenings, the music halls have been used, and the theatres, and the picture houses, all have been used, not for the trivial trash which is given to the people of this country—but for the purpose of organising the production of food and the work inside the Co-operative movement.

We saw that prior to our coming to Russia signs of this treaty, which was to be the final advance into Estonia, Lithuania, and so on—the border countries between Germany and Russia—the Capitalist class in the respective towns had lists of men who were members of the Soviets, and those members of the Soviets were taken and put against a wall, and shot. In the negotiations, the Capitalists are our mutual enemy—and if it was their business and their right and their duty to shoot their own men, then let them do it in their country, and then to allow France, Britain and Italy to march over them and make these German workers slaves at the dictates of the capitalists of the other parts of the world. There was the situation from their point of view and from our point of view too.

THE CAPITALISTS ADOLPHUS THE CONSTITUTION

It has been pointed out that if we developed a revolution the Germans would come over and, instead of having liberty, we would be under the iron heel of the Kaiser. If I grant that that is true, it is equally true in the other case that the Allies would do in Germany what the German Kaiser with the capitalist class of Germany would do in this

FACE TO FACE

The Lord Advocate pointed out here that I probably was a man among others when you rise for your own, are more dangerous to capitalism than rises the German enemies at your gates. The Lord Advocate indicated in the Press, and I have stated it as well, I am glad that you have made this statement, as it is a historic trial that has ever been fought face to face. The Bolsheviks got into power in October, and the people wished peace, and they were doing their best to get peace, but the result has not been obtained. The Bolsheviks wished peace throughout the world, and the war to cease in order that they might settle down to the real business of life, the economic reorganisation of the whole of Russia. They therefore got into negotiation with the Germans, and they and the German

country. There can only be a revolution when the workers of all the countries stand united and capitalism is crushed, and until then the war must go on incessantly and incessantly. It is not because I am against my own people. My own people are the workers here, and the workers in Germany and elsewhere. So it is going to plant the scientific method British products may be thrown on to the markets of the world. This is scientific methods applied to commerce internationally as well as nationally. These preparations are being made, it is being said, for the purpose of carrying on the war after the war. Nobody denies that there is a war, an economic war, between the Germans and the Americans and their friends, and there is going to be a war between the nations, and the respective Governments will take care that, as far as they can, their capitals be protected, because which they have control.

You have then, the war for empire, and the Americans, who already have got one or two of the islands in the West Indies, and I understand that America has also got hold of Dutch Guiana. It has also been suggested that Mexico be brought into the American States. Britain herself is looking after her own interests. She has taken the Congo, and she is also looking after her own interests in Mesopotamia, Palestine, and she will use them for her own ends, and I do not believe Britain for that. Britain has got many troubles.

We see Japan also on the outlook. Japan has been trying repeatedly to get hold of Korea. Japan also like to get a big chunk of Siberia. Even to-day we see the British Government, with all anxious to grab more and more power. We know the secret treaties and disclosures made by our Bolshevik comrades. We know that these nations have been building up their plans so that when the Germans have been beaten they will get that territory, or that territory. They are at war for Empire. That was absolutely necessary for the commercial prosperity of the nation.

All the property destroyed during the war will be replaced. In the next five years there is going to be a great world trade depression and the respective Governments, to get out of that depression, and to get into the markets of the world to get rid of their goods, and in fifteen years' time from the close of this war—I have pointed this out at all my meetings—we are into the next war if Capitalism lasts; we cannot escape it.

Britain has the best chance, did everybody, should it hold back from the war. The necessity had the attitude of Great Britain, but in spite of all Great Britain's skill or cunning, there has been war. I have heard it said that the Western civilisations are destroying themselves as the Eastern civilisations destroyed themselves. In fifteen years' time we may have the first great war started on in the Pacific—America, Japan, or even Japan and China v. America. We have then the possibility of another war, greater and far more serious in its consequences than the present war. I have pointed that out to my audiences.

PROBLEMS AHEAD
If one side or the other wins, then the revenge will come, as France did in seeking revenge after the drubbing she got in 1871. Realising that, we, as representatives of the workers of the world, do not want the side or the other to be the victors. We wish the side to be the war to be won by the workers, and to do that, then it is necessary that they have to adopt methods and tactics entirely different from the methods which would be adopted, or could be adopted under normal circumstances. Abnormal lines of action must be taken, such as our comrades in Russia took. The very circumstances and the Russian Soviets the line of the action must be taken, the only way we could do it would be to adopt methods peculiar to the working-class organisation in this country in the interests of the workers themselves.

The suggestions I made were intended only to develop revolutionary thought inside the minds of the workers. I made them at the meeting on the 20th that representatives of the police were present, and therefore, if I had been going to take action themselves, it would be absolutely foolish and stupid for them to adopt the suggestions I had given them. I only gave out these suggestions so that they might work out plans of their own if they thought fit to take action to bring about peace. I was convinced that the working-class, if it adopted the working-class line, if it was going to take action, must not only go for peace but for revolution. I pointed out to the workers in this country, in order to solve all the problems of capitalism, they would have to get the land and the means of production.

I pointed out to them that if capitalism lasted after the war, with the growing size of the trusts, with the great aggregation that were taken place, with the imperialistic trusts, with the works, with the improved methods of production, up the workers, with the development of research and experiment, that we were going to have the workers turning out three, four and five times as much wealth as they had done in pre-war times, and a great problem would arise—a greater problem than ever before—before the country of disposing of its surplus products on the market of the world, not only of general goods for the surplus goods, but in getting the raw material. We see to-day in the committees appointed by the Government that they are anxious to get control of the markets of the world in order to exclude the Germans.

THE RUSH FOR EMPIRE

Our Government have already appointed a Land Organisation of the Board of Trade and of the Foreign Office, so it is going to plant scientific method British products may be thrown on to the markets of the world. This is scientific methods applied to commerce internationally as well as nationally. These preparations are being made, it is being said, for the purpose of carrying on the war after the war. Nobody denies that there is a war, an economic war, between the Germans and the Americans and their friends, and there is going to be a war between the nations, and the respective Governments will take care that, as far as they can, their capitals be protected, because which they have control.

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"NOTHING TO RETRACT"

In view of the fact that the great Powers are not prepared to stop the war until the one side or the other is broken down, it is our business as members of the working class to see that this war ceases to-day, not only to save the lives of the young men of the present, but also to stave off the next great war. That has been my attitude and justifies my conduct in recent times. I am out for an absolute reconstruction of Society, on a Co-operative basis, throughout all the world; when we stop the war, that is the only way we could do it would be to stop the war in the interests of the workers themselves.

I have taken up unconstitutional action at this time because of the abnormal circumstances and because precedent has been given by the British Government. I am a Socialist, and have been fighting and will fight for an absolute reconstruction of Society for the working-class. I am proud of my conduct. I have stood by my conduct, with my intellect, and with my heart, and done to the war what would not have been taken if it had been square and clean for my principles. I have nothing to retract. I have nothing to be ashamed of. Your class position is against my class position. There are two classes of morality. There is the capitalist class morality and there is the capitalist class position. There is this abominable morality and there is the position between Germany and Britain. A victory for Germany is a defeat for Britain; a victory for Britain is a defeat for Germany. And it is exactly the same so far as our class is concerned. What is moral is the one class is absolutely immoral for the other, and vice versa. No matter what your accusations against me may be; no matter what the working-class says at the back of your head, my appeal to the working-class. I appeal exclusively to the working-class, and they only can bring about the revolution. The whole world will be in one brotherhood, on a sound economic foundation. That, and that alone, can be the means of bringing about a reorganisation of Society. That can only be obtained when the people of the world get the world, and retain the world.

The Judge pronounced sentence of five years penal servitude. MacLean then turned to his comrades in the court "Keep it going, boys; keep it going!"

Published By: The John McLean Society, Nan McLean Milton, Atholl Cottage, Westfield, Nr. Bathgate, W. Lothian.
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